

# Human Trafficking Task Force

Eric Schmitt, Missouri Attorney General

Alison Phillips, Executive Director

## Annual Report 2020

A stylized map of Missouri in red and dark blue, positioned on the left side of the page. A large, light blue diagonal line crosses the entire page from the top right to the bottom left, passing over the map and the central text.

**STOP HUMAN TRAFFICKING**  
*Together.*

TRAFFICKING HOTLINE 1-888-373-7888

Prepared for the Office of the Missouri Attorney  
General by Katelyn Beilsmith

Introduction by Lee Gibson of Relentless Pursuit



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# INTRODUCTION

## Our Purpose

It is impossible for any single agency or organization to respond comprehensively to the problem of human trafficking. Traffickers range from opportunistic individuals to sophisticated criminal organizations, with multijurisdictional activity. The resulting victimization is extreme and involves diverse populations with a host of needs. The response to human trafficking is most effective, coordinated, and efficient through multidisciplinary and collaborative problem-solving efforts.

The power of a successful anti-human trafficking collaborative effort can transform the limitations of a singular agency or organization into a strong, strategic multidisciplinary team with substantially improved capacity to impact the problem.

Effective collaboration is more easily conceptualized than accomplished; nevertheless, it is essential. Task forces that work through initial or longstanding collaboration challenges find it is a difficult but worthwhile endeavor. Everyone wants to make a greater impact on the problem. Task forces with effective collaboration find partners to be the greatest strength in fighting this crime and supporting its victims, and a valued resource rather than an impediment.

Research by [Northeastern University's Institute on Race and Justice](#) indicates that jurisdictions with active multidisciplinary anti-human trafficking task forces are more likely to identify human trafficking victims and achieve successful prosecution of offenders.

*As task force members (both individuals and organizations) learn about the capacities and limitations of one another, and gain experience working together, authentic collaboration on everyone's part makes responding to incidents of human trafficking not only easier, but also more successful.*

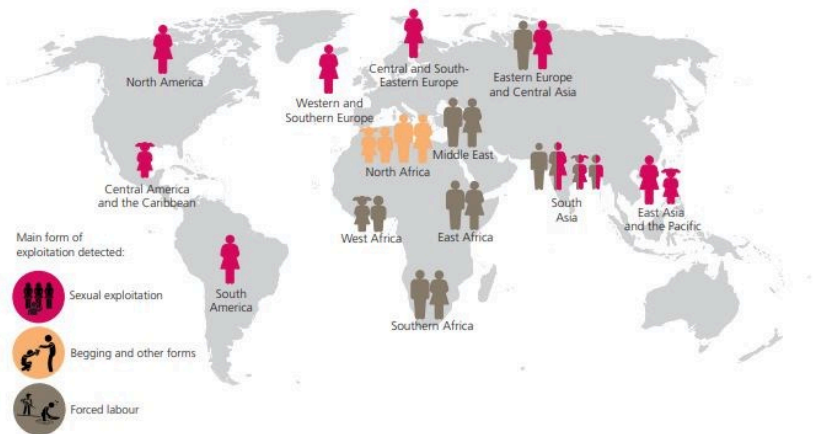
# THE PROBLEM

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The Human Trafficking (HT) industry exploits millions around the world.

This exploitation takes on many forms, including but not limited to: forced labor, prostitution/commercial sexual exploitation, and debt bondage.

Main forms of exploitation and profiles of detected victims, by subregions, 2016 (or most recent)



Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

Note: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on the map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Image Sourced from: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

## Trafficking in the Law

### Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000:

“Severe forms of trafficking in persons include:

- Sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or
- The recruitment, harboring, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.”

### **Victims**

Any individual has the potential to become a victim of human trafficking.

Although it is impossible to predict who will be victimized, below are some common vulnerabilities, that when present, may increase the potential for exploitation:

- History of sexual abuse
- Substance abuse (addiction)
- Low socioeconomic status
- High ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) score
- Involved with child welfare
- Homelessness and runaway youth
- Disability
- Foreign nationals
- Undocumented status
- Low self esteem
- At-risk online activity

### **Traffickers**

Like victims, traffickers come from diverse backgrounds. Trafficking takes many different forms and the scale of each trafficking operation can vary. Traffickers are not always involved in organized crime.

The following are the 5 basic types of traffickers:

- Familial
- Individuals
- Gang
- National and international criminal organizations
- Survival sex

Not all trafficking is sex trafficking. Labor trafficking is also prevalent in the U.S. Below are several common venues where labor trafficking takes place:

- Food Service
- Domestic Labor
- Agriculture
- Health and Beauty Services

### **Buyers**

In order to successfully reduce trafficking prevalence in the state, demand for commercial sex and forced labor must be addressed. It is estimated that around 6% of men in the U.S. have bought sex in the past year, with up to 15% buying at any point in their lifetime (Demand Abolition, 2018). Around a quarter of all buyers buy sex more often than once a month and account for over 75% of the sex trafficking market.

# Our Members

## Criminal Justice Sector

- Josh Campbell, Missouri State Parks
- Christopher Connally, Chief of Police St. Joseph
- Karen Heislin, Missouri State Highway Patrol
- Randee Keiser, Jasper County Sheriff
- Shannon Lee, Department of Corrections
- John Loe, Springfield Police Department
- Captain Norman Murphy, Missouri State Highway Patrol
- Sgt. Andy Muscato, Columbia Police Department
- Sgt. Dan Nash, Missouri State Highway Patrol
- Tena Riley, Missouri Probation and Parole
- Sgt. Jason Strong, St. Joseph Police Department

## Prosecutors

- Ben Butler, Cass County
- Kaitlynn Donnelly, Platte County
- Jo Leigh Fischer, Johnson County
- Scott Fox, Cole County
- Catherine Vannier, Special Victims Resource Prosecutor, Missouri Office of Prosecution Services
- Eric Zahnd, Platte County

## Legal Assistance

- Caleb Aponte, Attorney General's Office
- Jennifer Coffin, Attorney General's Office
- Sarah Jones, Attorney General's Office

## Government

- Heather Luebbert, Missouri Department of Transportation
- Terri Parker, Missouri Department of Transportation
- Alison Phillips, Director of the Human Trafficking Task Force, Attorney General's Office

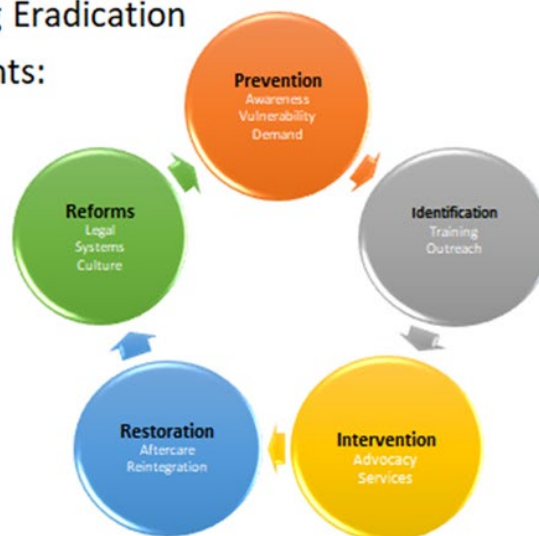
## Social Services

- Sherrita Allen, The Covering House
- Paul L. Banda, Washington University in St. Louis School of Medicine
- David Bennet, EPIK Project
- Deborah Bledsoe, Children's Division
- Brandon Cox, Oasis Refuge
- Jennifer Dochler, Missouri Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- Lee Gibson, Relentless Pursuit
- Tara Goins, Children's Division
- Jennifer Hansen, Children's Mercy Hospital
- Roxie Lloyd, Restoration House KC
- Cindy Mallot, Crisis Aid International
- Christine McDonald, Christine's Vision
- Heidi Olsen, Children's Mercy KC
- Maureen Reintes, Missouri Missing
- Katie Rhoades, Healing Action, MOCATE
- Karolyn Schrage, RISE Coalition
- Russ Tuttle, The Stop Trafficking Project
- Kris Wade, Justice Project KC
- Nanette Ward, Stop Human Trafficking Coalition of Central Missouri
- Kara Wilcox, Missouri Children's Division
- Jessica Wilkins, The Covering House

# Elements of Eradication

In creating this task force, it is acknowledged that in order to eradicate human trafficking, efforts should be focused upon five separate elements: identification, intervention, restoration, reformation, and prevention. It is possible to address each of these elements through efforts such as public education, formal training, improvement of services for victims for both the short and long-term, advocating for legal reforms that make it easier to prosecute trafficking cases, and increasing public awareness of human trafficking.

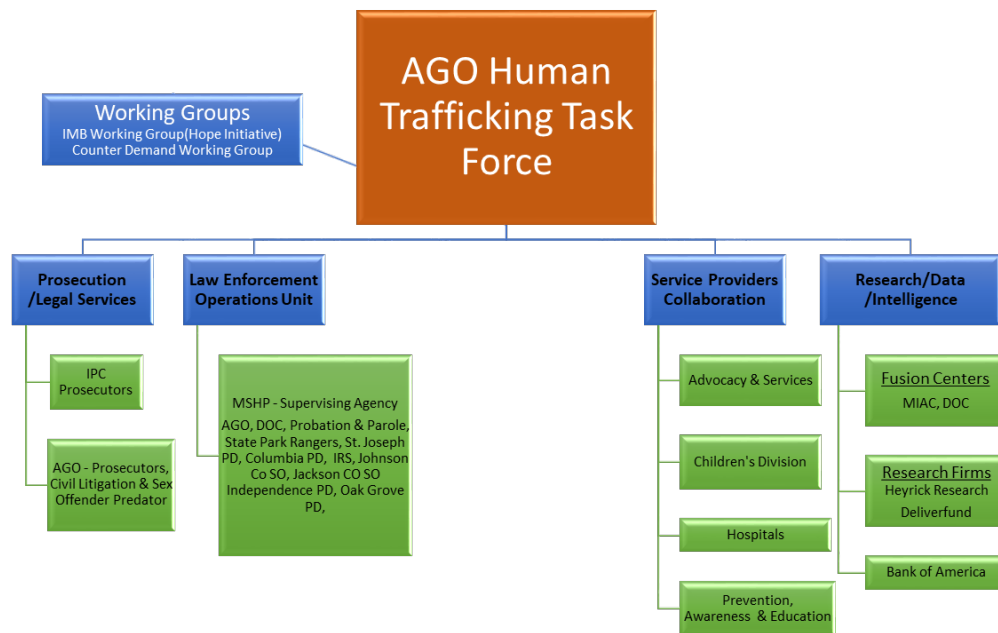
Human Trafficking Eradication  
Requires 5 Elements:



Adapted from:  
Alliance for Freedom,  
Restoration and Justice

# Our Structure

## The “Show Me State” Task Force Model



The Human Trafficking Task Force of the Missouri Attorney General's Office is designed and structured with an emphasis on law enforcement. This approach fosters an environment in which law enforcement can efficiently identify, respond to, and investigate human trafficking cases. Effective, impactful law enforcement is necessary for the eradication of human trafficking in Missouri. However, law enforcement cannot wholly address the issue on its own. In order for this task force (and law enforcement) to achieve the greatest impact, the following will be implemented:

- Creation of a supportive network of victim services providers
- Coordination and utilization of data, research and intelligence
- Courts that are trained and equipped with laws strong enough to ensure convictions
- Training for victim identification available in key sectors like schools, hospitals, and the transportation sector
- A functional and efficient reporting system (hotline)
- An active and robust community that is working to prevent human trafficking through addressing vulnerabilities and stopping demand for forced labor and commercial sex

The Human Trafficking Task Force is structured to:

- Ensure statewide quality of HT response - Serving the entire state across both urban and rural areas with efficiency and consistent quality
- Provide a holistic response through coordination of services, trainings, intelligence sharing and more
- Engage multiple agencies in a multi-disciplinary, coordinated strategy

Over the summer, Attorney General Eric Schmitt phased out the Missouri-specific human trafficking hotline in favor of prioritizing the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH). This change reduced response time and aids in cross-jurisdictional cooperation. Utilizing the NHTH has allowed for more efficient coordination between local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies across jurisdictions on calls related to human trafficking. Since the switch over to the national hotline, there have been two prominent success stories:

Over the summer, a call came into the National Human Trafficking Hotline regarding a potential trafficking situation involving two females at a hotel. The NHTH reached out to the lead of our statewide task force's law enforcement human trafficking operations who in turn coordinated with the local police department finding one available officer and two uniformed Troopers to respond the hotel.

Our state wide coordination efforts resulted in a very efficient response time; from the time that the caller initiated the report with the NHTH to the time the three officers knocked on the hotel door was

**29 minutes.**

This past spring, in the early morning hours, a public transportation worker noticed something was amiss with a female passenger. This alert, aware citizen, recognized several signs that indicated that the female passenger was potentially a victim of human trafficking.

Because that worker was familiar with the signs of trafficking, he immediately called in a tip to the National Human Trafficking Hotline that was referred to the Missouri State Highway Patrol. That responding Trooper in turn contacted a victim advocate. By the time the female passenger disembarked, the responding Trooper and victim advocate were there to assist her, and this potential victim got the help she needed.

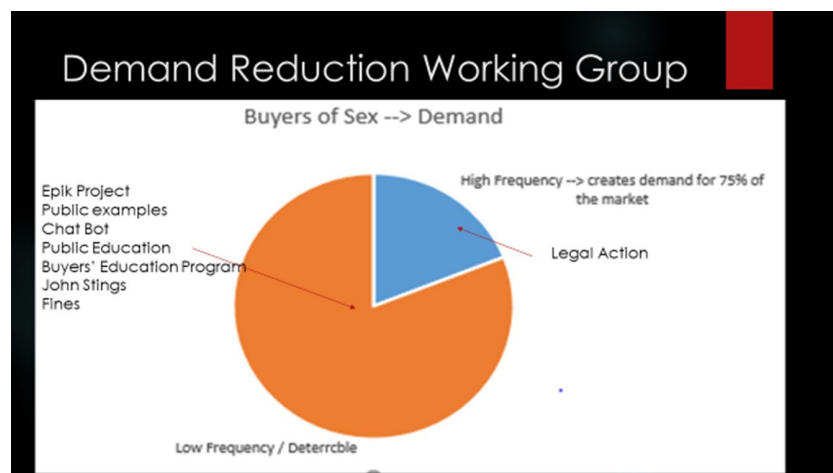
# Working Groups

## Illicit Massage Businesses (IMB) Working Group

The IMB working group is comprised of representatives from law enforcement and regulatory agencies, victim services, legal experts, and intelligence analysts the sole intent to eradicate illicit massage businesses from Missouri. In accordance with the National Human Trafficking Hotline, Illicit Massage Businesses (IMBs) are the top venue for sex trafficking within the United States. Unfortunately, the same holds true for the state of Missouri. These businesses use the façade of a legal massage storefront in order to mask their trafficking activities. To combat these IMBs, the Hope Initiative was created by the IMB Working Group.

## Demand Reduction Group

In this group, law enforcement, attorneys, victim service providers, and non-profit organizations work together to implement strategies to target the demand that fuels sex trafficking. Multiple studies have shown that targeting demand is an efficient and cost-effective way of targeting the sex trafficking market. For example, after legislation in Sweden that increased legal penalties for buyers was passed, street prostitution reportedly decreased by 50-75% (Swedish Government Report SOU, 2010). This Demand Reduction working group operates by separately targeting frequent and non-frequent buyers. By targeting the demand for commercial sex, income streams for traffickers are disrupted. Additionally, with a decrease in demand for commercial sex, a decrease in overall trafficking prevalence should result. Some of the strategies that the demand reduction working group are using include, but are not limited to, online intervention, buyer outreach, and 'john' schools.

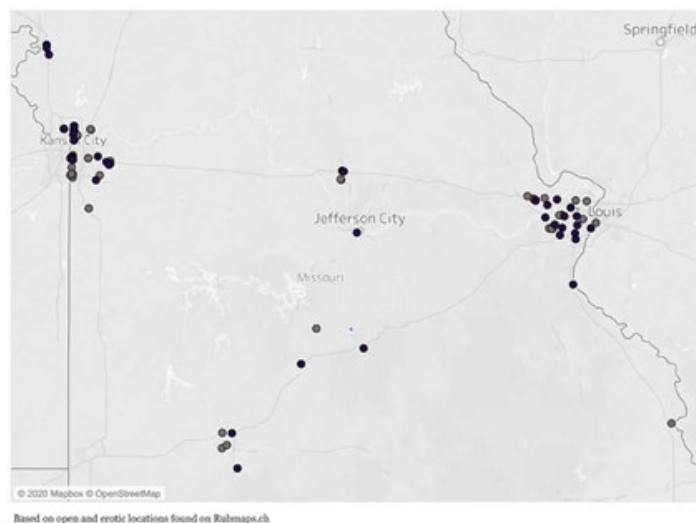


# The Hope Initiative

The Hope initiative was conceived by the IMB Working Group over the course of several months to target illicit massage businesses throughout the state of Missouri. These brick and mortar institutions have allowed human traffickers to operate with relative impunity, allowing for boldness in their violent, sexual exploitation of their victims. Until recently, the state of Missouri's law enforcement response to these IMBs has been limited at best. The state of Missouri is in the process of putting a definitive end to this impunity.

To address the issue of law enforcement response, Attorney General Schmitt launched the Hope Initiative. The Hope Initiative is an ongoing three phased approach for the interdiction of IMB's in Missouri.

**Legal Precedent:** *State v. Golden Massage, et al.* was a Greene County case in front of Judge Cordonnier. The original petition in this case was filed in 2017 against a number of illicit massage parlors in the Springfield area. The State argued that these businesses were operating houses of prostitution and were, therefore, a public nuisance under Missouri law. All except one signed a consent judgment. On July 30, 2020, Caleb Aponte and Sarah Jones tried the remaining claim in a bench trial. At the time of filing, the last remaining defendant, HongBo Qi, was operating an illicit massage business under the name Phoenix Massage. She had since sold that business and began operating a massage parlor under the name Spring Massage. Judge Cordonnier ruled from the bench that Hongbo Qi was likely operating an illicit massage business because of her advertisements on websites such as RubMaps and CityXGuide. Judge Cordonnier also held that those websites, as well as similar websites, are only used for the purpose of advertising illicit services such as prostitution.



### **Phase I --- *Landlord Engagement***

The vast majority of IMBs are utilizing rented spaces, generally located in nondescript strip malls or shopping centers. The intent of this phase is to engage and educate commercial real estate landlords about IMB tenants and encourage their subsequent eviction. In this phase, IMB's are identified through illicit ads posted on a variety of online sources. These ads are saved and used to inform the presence of illicit activity and form a foundation for investigation. The presence of the ads are shared with the IMBs landlord and a letter is sent from the Attorney General's Office encouraging eviction. At the conclusion of 2020, 77 letters have been sent and 42% of the initially identified IMBs have been either closed or are in the process of eviction.

**42%** of IMB's  
targeted in Phase I are  
now closed or are in the  
process of closing!

### **Phase II --- *Civil Action***

This phase utilizes a civil approach to encourage closure. This phase utilizes state public nuisance statutes, allowing for a suit against IMBs for operating a business in violation of these statutes. This phase also contains an initiative for the development of a shared intelligence database that is used to identify and map criminal networks. There are currently ongoing civil suits, and the intelligence database has resulted in the denial of 95 applications for business and massage therapist licenses.

### **Phase III --- *Criminal Action***

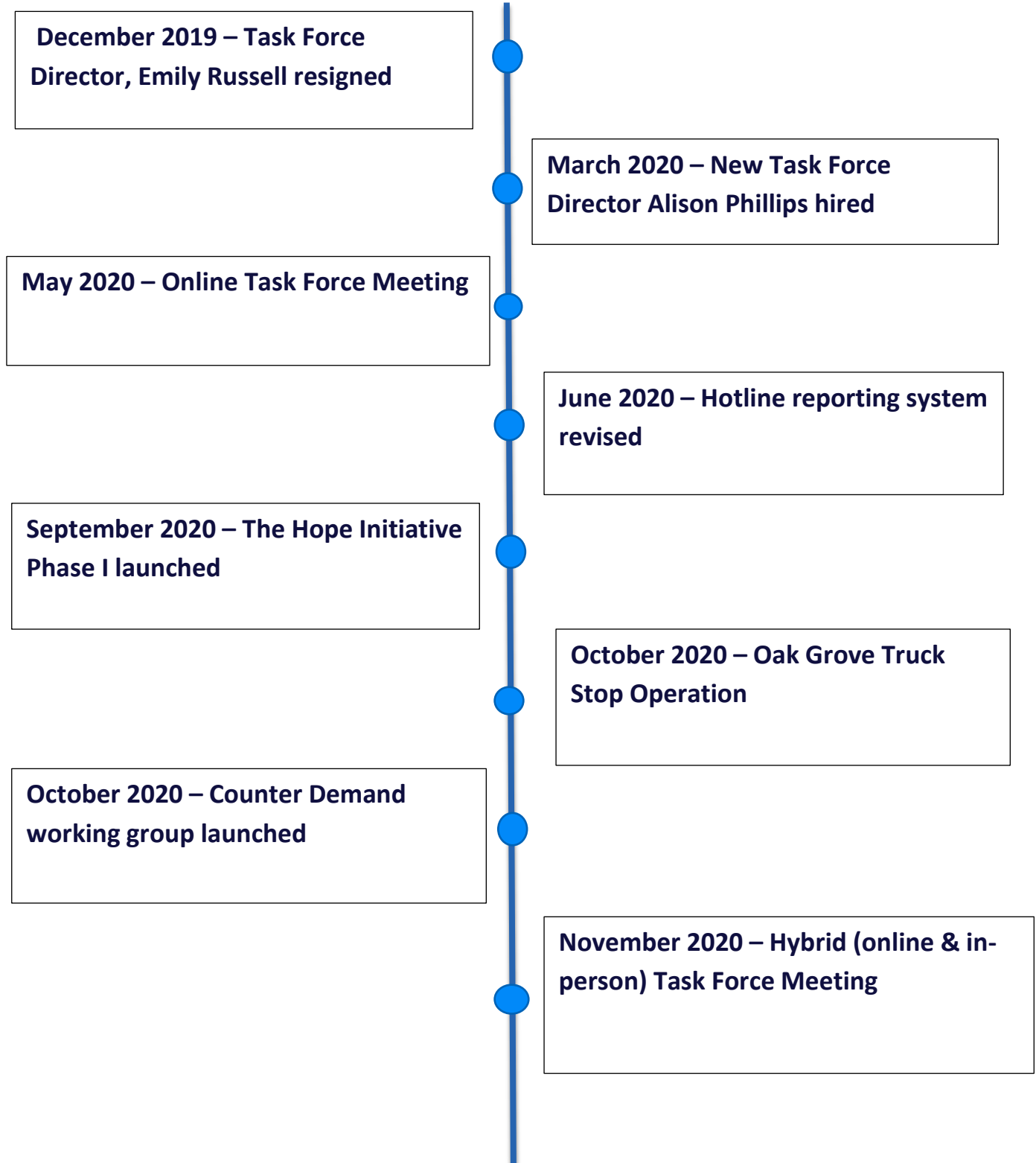
The intelligence sharing network developed in Phase II plays a key role in Phase III. In this phase law enforcement agencies will investigate and build criminal cases against human traffickers and their networks. If sufficient evidence is collected, owners and operators of IMBs can be charged with human trafficking. This phase relies heavily on the coordination of law enforcement and other relevant agencies.

Since its inception, the Hope Initiative has made great strides in the fight against HT in Missouri. There has already been a marked decrease in the prevalence of IMBs across the state.

# 2020 Year in Review

## Task Force Events

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# COVID-19 and Human Trafficking

The spread of COVID-19 has had an unprecedented effect on every aspect of life. Human trafficking, specifically child sexual exploitation (CSE), is no exception. According to an INTERPOL report, there has been a frightening increase in suspected CSE worldwide. In the report, several countries have noted an increase in online distribution of CSE material, in both exchanging and uploading self-generated material. In India, there has reportedly been a 95% increase in consumption of child pornography (INTERPOL, 2020).

In the U.S., the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has reported a 98.66% increase in reports of online sexual solicitation of children between January through November 2020 compared to the same time period last year (NCMEC, 2020).

It is important to note that although all child sex trafficking is a form of CSE, not all CSE is trafficking. The difference between the two is whether or not there is something of value exchanged.

In regards to sex trafficking, expert Rob Spectre of Childsafe.ai says that demand for commercial sex is at a lifetime low. Starting in March 2020, searches for escort services declined by 25%. However, Spectre states that high unemployment, increased time with abusers (due to stay at home orders), decreased access to mandatory reporters, and other contributing factors, may result in a lifetime high of “supply.” Though buying as a whole is at a lifetime low, the high-frequency buyers mentioned in the “problem” section of this report are continuing to buy. This is particularly concerning as studies have shown that those who buy commercial sex more frequently tend to be more violent towards the people they buy (Farley et al., 2011).

In addition, there have been reports in the U.S. of landlords soliciting tenants for sexual favors in exchange for reduced or forgiven rent amidst shutdowns. If the use of force or coercion is involved, this action meets the criteria for human trafficking.

The rise in human trafficking and sexual exploitation can be explained by a number of factors:

- Lockdowns and quarantines may require a victim to spend more time with their abuser or trafficker
- Less time at work or school means more time on the internet to exchange exploitative material
- With jobs being suspended or terminated, people may look to trafficking as a means to meet their financial needs
- Stay at home orders and other restrictions reduce access to mandated reporters and others who are vital in detecting and responding to abuse and exploitation (INTERPOL, 2020)

# Missouri Trends

## Demand

### *The EPIK Project*

- Reported 90,000 commercial sex buyers in the Kansas City area just in 2016
- In all 50 states, there have been 27,944 attempts to purchase sex on EPIK ads in 2020 **(excluding March-July due to COVID-19)**
- Just in the week of October 19, 2020, there were 460 calls made to three EPIK ads in the Kansas City area

## Victim Services

- *Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence – Member Agencies*
  - Identified 141 victims of domestic violence that were also victims of trafficking
  - Identified 144 victims of sexual assault who were also victims of trafficking
- *The Children's Division of the Missouri Department of Social Services*
  - 197 human trafficking specific reports across the state, 24 of which were substantiated
  - 221 trafficking victims were alleged, with 29 confirmed
- *Restoration House*
  - 653 total requests for services
  - 44 total request for services concerning minor trafficking victims
- *Relentless Pursuit*
  - Has opened a drop in center named Christine's Place that provides food, clothing, and showers to prostituted individuals in the Kansas City area
    - In just 30 days of operation they have seen a total of 113 girls in 447 unique visits
  - Have begun counter demand efforts with the purchasing and disseminating of 'Report a John' signs
- *Oasis Refuge*
  - Opened this year as a residential treatment center for minor female victims of sex trafficking
  - COVID 19 has limited the number of referrals received
- *Choices Medical*
  - Reported 38 intensive interventions and continued STD testing for referred human trafficking specific clients
- *Children's Mercy Hospital*
  - Reported a drop in sexual assault cases

- 55 children were identified as either extremely high risk for trafficking or confirmed trafficking victims

## Law Enforcement

- *Missouri State Highway Patrol*
  - 385 incidents of trafficking
  - 206 arrests
  - 47 rescues of victims
  - 22 human trafficking trainings that are estimated to have reached around 2,700 people
  - Increased effort in organizing anti-trafficking operations
  - Increased education efforts for strategic sectors & common venues of trafficking
  - In collaboration with the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH), received 68 tips
    - Just in June, the NHTH contacted MSHP 22 times
  - Increase in demand for Interdiction for the Protection of Children (IPC) training
- *Columbia Police Department*
  - Faster police responses to hotline calls
  - Reported a growing list of missing juveniles since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic

## Prosecution

- *Johnson County*
  - 120% increase in crimes involving a child
  - 68% increase in incidents involving a firearm
  - 56% increase in sex offenses among adults
  - Increase in child abuse cases
  - Rise in domestic violence cases
  - 5 homicides in 2020, which is a rise in their usual rate of 1 homicide every five years

## Corrections

- *Missouri Department of Corrections*
  - Aids in statewide intelligence gathering and sharing

## Community Outreach

- *The Stop Trafficking Project*
  - Identified six victims of trafficking through public education outreach
  - Reported that from January to March 1,938 students had met a stranger in person or they were actively sending nude photographs of themselves
  - 62% of students said the project's BE Alert program had made an impact
  - Have released an educational phone application named: *Stop Trafficking App*
  - Have created and released community impact videos
  - 107 presentations cancelled due to COVID

# Human Trafficking in Missouri in 2020

[www.makemofree.com](http://www.makemofree.com)

To Report Human Trafficking:  
1-888-373-7888

Missouri

Human Trafficking is a pervasive problem in the state of Missouri.

## Children's Mercy Hospital

- 39 Children were identified as either extremely high risk for trafficking or confirmed trafficking victims

## Missouri State Highway Patrol

- 385 incidents (Information/contact concerning exploited/at risk/adult/child or offender)
- 206 arrests
- 47 rescues of victims
- 22 human trafficking trainings
- Hits reached over 2,700 people

## Stop Trafficking Project

- From January to March 2020, 1,038 students had met a stranger in person or were actively sending nude photos of themselves
- 6 Children were identified as child sex trafficking (CST) victims .16 children were identified as CST victims in 2020.
- 107 educational presentations were cancelled due to COVID.

## Johnson County

- Reported a 120% increase in crimes involving a child

## Restoration House

- 653 total requests for services
- 44 requests for services for minor trafficking victims

MISSOURI

## Missouri Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence (MCAHSV) Member Agencies

- Identified 141 victims of domestic violence that were also victims of trafficking
- Identified 144 victims of sexual assault who were also victims of trafficking

## Missouri Children's Division - DSS

- 197 reports of trafficking specific across the state - 24 substantiated
- 221 trafficking victims alleged - 29 confirmed

## MOCATE

- provided trainings to 500 people
- 144 survivors of human trafficking & exploitation received services through Healing Action

Identified sexually exploitative Illicit Massage Businesses (IMBs) in Missouri

83

Identified IMBs closed due to task force efforts via The Hope Initiative

42%

The Missouri Attorney General's Office - Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force

## Additional Resources

**Always call 911 if you or somebody else is in immediate danger.**

If you suspect human trafficking please  
call the National Human Trafficking Hotline:

**1-888-373-7888**

Or text

**“BEFREE” to 233733**

If see any form of online child sexual exploitation (child pornography, sexual solicitation from adults, sexual content sent to a child, etc.):

1. **DO NOT CLICK OFF.** If you come across child pornography, it is important that you have the URL for the content when you
2. Report on NCMEC’s CyberTipline:

<https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline>

To learn more about trafficking and access more local resources, please visit:

[www.makemofree.com](http://www.makemofree.com)

or visit

[mocate.org/resources/missouri-resource-guide](http://mocate.org/resources/missouri-resource-guide)

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